

CHRIS CARY

WORDS STUART CLARK



HE WAS ONE OF THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL FIGURES IN THE HISTORY OF IRISH BROADCASTING, TURNING RADIO NOVA INTO A MONEY-MAKING MACHINE AND COURTING CONFRONTATION WITH THE GARDAI, RTE AND THE NUJ. WITH THE END OF THE PIRATE ERA, HE MOVED TO ENGLAND, WHERE HE CAME UNSTUCK, FOLLOWING A SCAM THAT DEPRIVED RUPERT MURDOCH OF MILLIONS. MANY A COLOURFUL ADVENTURE LATER, CHRIS CARY IS BACK IN THE NEWS - AND DETERMINED THAT HE CAN CONVINCE THE POWERS-THAT-BE TO LET HIM OPERATE THE NATIONAL LONG-WAVE FREQUENCY THAT ONCE HOUSED ATLANTIC 252.

You can accuse Chris Cary of many things, but leading a dull, uneventful life isn't one of them.

Joining the offshore Radio Caroline in 1967, he spent five years broadcasting from the North Sea before re-emerging, after a brief hiatus, on Radio Luxembourg under his own name.

A former engineer, he was quick to spot the potential of the early video games market, later expanding into computers. After being tipped off by an old shipmate, Cary headed to Dublin in the late '70s where, to his joy, he discovered that the Posts & Telegraph Act wasn't worth the paper it was written on. Cue the launch of the first Irish "superpirate", Sunshine Radio, which so angered its rivals that Cary awoke one morning to find their aerial collapsed across the hotel they were operating from. The oxyacetylene cutting marks on the metal were still hot.

Tired of having to deal with pesky business partners, 1980 saw him walk out on Sunshine and set up the even brasher, more commercially driven Radio Nova.

Adhering to what's known in American media circles as "The McDonald's Theory", Cary devised a rigid format that was served up to listeners 24/7. If you loved it at breakfast, the logic ran, you'd love it equally at 5 o'clock in the afternoon and 11 at night. The establishment scoffed but within two years Nova had grabbed 60% of the ratings - the largest audience share ever achieved by a 'commercial' station in Dublin. While the indie brigade barely got a look in, Nova's "adult contemporary" format made Irish stars out of Toto, Tom Petty, Jackson Browne, Reo Speedwagon and countless other American acts. It also provided the likes of Bryan Dobson, Ken Hammond, John Clarke, Colm Hayes, Declan Meehan, Mike Hogan and Gareth O'Callaghan with the know-how to embark on long and successful media careers.

"Chris Cary was a difficult, sometimes impossible man to deal with," says one old boy, "but he knows what sells and how to sell it. Even if it's not what people really want!"

It wasn't all sweetness and £50,000 cash giveaways, though, with the National Union of Journalists so

incensed by Cary's work practices that they spent much of 1984 picketing Nova's Herbert Street HQ. Worse was to come in 1986 when the station was raided by the Posts & Telegraphs. For all the talk of "interference to emergency services", the common wisdom is that the station had become too successful for its own good. RTE Radio 2 was being crucified in the ratings war and, well, the Donnybrook suits weren't happy.

Knowing that new legislation to scupper the pirates was on the way, Cary moved Nova to his native Surrey where it haphazardly operated as a satellite service before closing altogether. He did return in 1989 to try and claim the first national commercial radio license but was beaten to it by Oliver Barry's short-lived Century Radio.

What's happened to him since is infinitely stranger than fiction. Having maintained his computer interests, Cary devised a way of pirating the smartcards that unscramble premium satellite television stations. Selling them for £450 each - a fraction of what's charged by the likes of Sky - he was pocketing £20,000 a day until arrested in 1996 by British police.

Not impressed with the four-year term given him by the courts, Cary absconded from Ford Open Prison just four months into his sentence and fled to New Zealand. An equally unimpressed Rupert Murdoch - who'd been stung for an estimated £30 million - sent private detectives to get him back. They successfully tracked him down and Cary was handed an additional 15 months.

His woes continued when, still serving time at Parkhurst Prison, he suffered a major stroke. For a while he was totally dependent on Sybil Fennell, his long-term partner and a former Radio Nova presenter.

"I don't know what I'm going to do now - sod all I suppose," he rued at the time. "Maybe I'll write a guide to being in prison and call it *In The Nick Of Time*."

Sent to the Isle of Man for specialist treatment, he discovered that the island had a redundant long-wave frequency that would enable a revived Nova to broadcast to the whole of the UK and Ireland. His interest in broadcasting revived, he entered

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negotiations with the Isle of Man authorities in relation to the use of the frequency. That option has now been put on the back-burner following the closure of TeamTalk 252, the station that occupied Ireland's long-wave frequency following the demise of Atlantic 252. The service — which has its transmitter in Trim, County Meath — has reverted to its joint owners, RTE and RTL (Radio Tele Luxembourg) and Cary feels that he might just be the man to put a successful pop station back on the air there.

Given that he's going to have to woo his old adversary in Montrose — not to mention the Irish government — Cary is happy to talk about radio — but not about his run-ins with the law.

Stuart Clark: Rewinding to 1989, did you expect to get the national commercial radio license?

Chris Cary: I thought it was a possibility. I wasn't conned out of anything. I didn't pay any money. Mind you, I have to admit, if somebody had asked me for a hundred grand in a brown envelope it would have been delivered the next morning. Absolutely.

Did you believe that your proven track record in Irish radio would eventually out? Especially as your main competitors for the licence had little or no broadcasting experience.

Never mind them, what about the broadcasting experience the members of the Independent Radio & Television Commission had? Having to have five minutes of yap every hour, whether it was important or not? The only thing I did feel I was conned out of — in a weird sort of way — is the long-wave 252 arrangement. I transmitted on that before anybody did. It wasn't for very long but I was the first. I've since watched it be wrong and wrong and wrong. At what point will somebody wake up? I'm not saying it's easy but, done properly, long-wave broadcasting is viable.

Even given Atlantic and TeamTalk's multi-million pound demises?

Yup. You couldn't do Top 40 now because it's full of shite dance music. The singles market died when it was taken over by club DJs. I haven't listened to Irish radio in seven years, but the obvious market in terms of Britain, is the one dominated by BBC Radio 2. Matthew Bannister let BBC Radio 1 go right down the pan — first with Chris Evans being lavatorial and then with all that stupid dance.

There's a lot of people who might disagree with your assessment of dance.

Dance is the kiss of death to anything. It's urban music, it's worth nothing. People won't advertise on it because it's all children. Anybody over 13 would never have listened to Atlantic 252. You'd say it was too young for you. They asked for their own demise.

The early Atlantic 252 was borderline — Radio Dublin to Radio Nova — but then it got worse and worse and disappeared up its arse eventually. Anybody who thought that was going to be a winner was nuts. As for TeamTalk, that was very courageous but I wouldn't have invested tuppence in it.

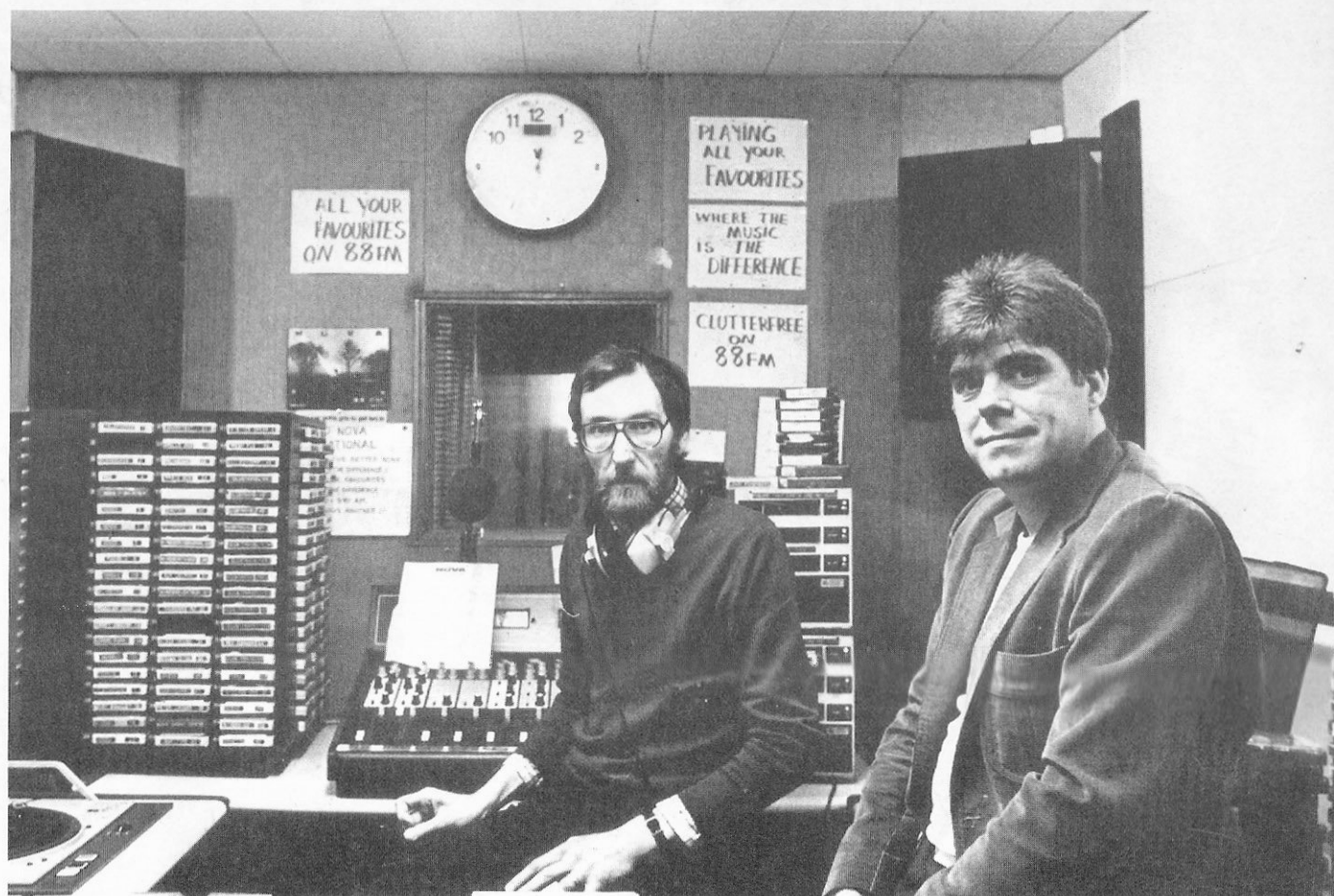
There must be somebody around with the vision and experience to make it work?

Yes, I'm sitting here! I'm just going to wait and see what's going to happen now it's reverted to RTE. They've got very few choices, really. Run it themselves, set fire to it all or get a third party involved. One of the things they could do is call it Radio Tara and put the best of Radio One and 2FM out to Britain, where you'd get an audience of two to three million immediately. They could have Radio One's breakfast show with all the talk and information and then go lighter at 10 o'clock with music radio 2FM.

But 2FM is predominantly talk until noon.

You're joking!

You have the Gerry Ryan Show which is talk and



Chris Cary (right) keeps a watchful eye on then Radio Nova DJ and now 2FM head honcho John Clarke

phone-ins followed at twelve by Larry Gogan and the Golden Hour.

There's no pop music on the pop music station until, what, 1 o'clock? That's ridiculous!

Do you honestly think that RTE are going to want to deal with someone who got so comprehensively up their noses in the past?

Because they've got a commercial as well as a public service side to them, I'm hopeful they might look at it and say, "Okay, if Chris Cary was so bloody clever with his Radio Nova..." I don't want to do local radio in Ireland, never did. I only went to Ireland, because I saw the potential of broadcasting back out of there to the UK. I wouldn't say it's a better market, but it's certainly bigger.

Looking back at the Mk. One Nova, do you think you did it right the whole way down the line?

I was fairly lucky. I seem to have a great gift for finding good people and putting them in the right places. You wouldn't believe how many programme directors I've met — 2FM's John Clarke for instance — from Radio Nova.

More than one person has described your approach as dictatorial. Fair comment?

There was only one programme director. Me. Nobody else. I had a few programme managers for five minutes that were told just to endorse what I wanted. Which they did to some degree and when they couldn't do it, they left.

What about your long running dispute with the National Union of Journalists?

The NUJ was something I could well have done without. I had no training whatsoever in dealing with the unions, so I didn't know what to do. In the end it just fizzled out and went away. It was not one of my better things, I must admit, but I was forced into a terrible situation because of not having a licence. It's old hat now. I don't really want to get into that again. Most people who went on strike have written to me in the past saying how sorry they were it went that way. **People always seem to home in on the negative, but what are the positive things Radio Nova achieved?**

Being told we were number one! I couldn't believe it

THEY WERE OF NOVA

SOME OF THE LEADING LIGHTS OF IRISH MEDIA WHO LEARNED THEIR CHOPS UNDER CHRIS CARY'S FORMIDABLE BATON.

John Clarke: 2FM Head of Programmes

Brian Dobson: RTE TV newsreader

Ken Hammond: RTE TV Newsreader

Gareth O'Callaghan: 2FM DJ

Colm Hayes: FM 104 Programme Director

Mike Hogan: In Dublin publisher

Greg Gaughran: FM 104 DJ

Declan Meehan: East Coast Radio DJ

Chris Barry: 98FM DJ

Tom Hardy: Today FM Associate Programme Director

when the research came through and said, "You're not just number one, you're number one by head and shoulders. What you're doing's absolutely working. People love it!" It's a great buzz when that happens. It doesn't very often in your life, I promise you.

Can you map out what you've done since leaving Ireland?

I run factories, usually. Machines. So now I'm going into high-powered computers. But I haven't let this radio thing go yet. It's not over till the Fat Lady Sings. I'd have to do a deal with RTE — which shouldn't be too difficult seeing as they want the revenue.

What was your relationship like with them?

It was okay. I never had any major rows with them. **It's obvious if you're trying to do business with a state body that people are going to say, "What's the story with Chris absconding from prison and going down to**

New Zealand like that?"

I don't think that's anything to do with me getting a radio licence, do you? What matters is that I can sort out long-wave 252 from Trim — which up till now has been an embarrassment.

Do you already have the people who'll front and DJ on it lined-up?

I have the finances in place. The presenters have been chosen. The music is scheduled. New jingles have been sourced. For Radio Nova to take to the airwaves and challenge BBC Radio 2 would only take a matter of days. We'll pick up where we left off which was excellent. It'd be a bloody threat within seconds, a close number two within four months and number one by year's end. That frequency's been allocated to Ireland for 40 years or more. It's so stupid that it's just been left to rot for so long. 🍌